



Statement by Congressman Greg Walden

Press Conference: Strengthening and Updating the ESA

Thursday, February 10, 2005

Thank you for being here today as we discuss an issue of great importance and deep personal interest to me and the thousands of hard-working individuals I represent in Oregon's Second District.

My district covers 20 counties in southern, central and eastern Oregon and is over 70,000 square miles. It is as vast as it is beautiful, rich with environmental diversity and home to natural resources and agricultural land that have contributed to the economic wellbeing of many communities for generations. Additionally, such diverse land plays host to a wide variety of species and habitats.

We are here today to discuss with you the importance of finding ways to update, enhance and strengthen the 30-year-old Endangered Species Act, legislation originally passed in 1973 that directly impacts families, businesses, communities, land, species and the environment. Both the House and Senate, as well as Interior Secretary Norton and the Administration, understand the importance of this endeavor so that the ESA can become a more effective tool for recovering threatened and endangered species.

In the 30-plus years since enactment of the ESA, over 1,800 species have been listed with an alarmingly low one percent recovery rate. Clearly, we need to take a look at the Act and figure out ways to make it an effective tool for species recovery, without unduly burdening the communities affected. Simply stated, this well-intentioned law is not working as it should.

Not only should the health of species throughout the nation be demonstrably improved by the ESA, but the health of communities and local economies should be carefully addressed as well. They are directly affected by the policy decisions driven by the Act and, consequently, should be a factor in making these decisions. For the sake of these communities, the species we are working to save, and the environmental habitats of these species, we have to take action now to ensure the ESA works as well as possible.

My District has had to face the harsh reality of what can happen when the government makes a sweeping policy decision, and gets it wrong. What individuals in the Klamath Basin have said all along, and what the National Academy of Sciences will confirm, the water in the basin should never have been cut off in 2001.

Had data used in the decision making process been subject to peer review before this drastic action, we would never have found ourselves facing the crisis we did. Scientific review is a common-sense principle that is applied to policy decisions throughout a variety of government departments and agencies, including the Department of Education, the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Health and Human Services. You are not allowed to publish findings in a medical or scientific journal without proper peer review. And if your doctor told you that your left leg had to be amputated, you would probably get a second opinion.

The idea of peer review is not a new one, but it is a logical one. Doesn't it make sense that this same basic principle would apply when talking about the survival or extinction of a species?

Peer review by itself, however, will not be the solution to making the ESA more effective. Together, we are working on ways to prioritize critical habitat designation, involve local citizens and communities in the data gathering process, provide better incentives for recovery, and enhance the role of states where appropriate.

There are multiple facets to this issue and the dialogue is ongoing. We have held hearings throughout the country and my colleagues and I have been meeting regularly. We are resolved to reaching consensus that will strengthen this three-decade old law.

I appreciate the commitment demonstrated by Chairman Pombo and Senators Crapo and Chafee as we move ahead on this effort, and I look forward to working together in order bring this legislation into the 21st century.

Thank you.